

ABOUT THIS SERIES:

COVID-19 upturned and reset the world in 2020. Five years later, the pandemic’s impacts are still felt in education, mental and behavioral health and the economy, especially inflation.



AP PHOTO/ROBERT F. BUKATY, FILE

Reading and math test scores are down across the country from before the coronavirus pandemic.

‘Significant learning loss’

MORE STUDENTS FALLING BEHIND IN READING, MATH SINCE COVID

BY MIKE SUNNUCKS • APG Media

Emily Levy isn’t surprised. Nor is MacKenzie Price, Sari Factor or others on the frontlines of K-12 education and the uphill climb to rebound from students’ learning gaps and falling test scores since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The recently released ‘National Report Card’ test scores show 40% of fourth graders don’t have basic reading skills, and 39% of eighth graders are behind in math. The numbers of lagging students are up 6 and 8 percentage points, respectively, since 2019, and the shutdowns and stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic.

School kids — across grade levels, demographics, geographies, types of school and economic class — have all seen math and reading test scores slide since before the pandemic.

In the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, no U.S. state saw improvements in eighth-grade math scores from 2019, and only Louisiana saw gains in fourth-grade reading.

States such as Oregon, Maryland, Delaware, Washington and Florida saw double-digit drops in some of their test results from before the pandemic.

“We have definitely seen significant learning loss,” said Levy, founder and director of EBL Coaching, which offers one-on-one tutoring services to kids in New York and New Jersey. “Pretty much from all kids.”

Levy is especially concerned about learning loss

among younger kids from COVID disruptions and post-pandemic hangovers.

“Those are really when the foundations of learning are established,” Levy said of early elementary grades. Kids who fall behind — or start behind — can struggle moving forward, she said.

Levy sees a mixed bag when it comes to school districts and their post-COVID paths. The pandemic started in 2020 and officially ended in 2023.

“Some schools are really trying to address those learning gaps,” she said. “Others have just continued to move forward” with their usual instruction approaches and pace, Levy said.

That’s problematic, and can be rooted in bureaucratic cultures and classroom teachers having too many students and not enough time to address individual students’ learning challenges.

Nhon Ma, CEO and co-founder of education technology startup Numerade, said it’s not just the NAEP test where U.S. students are struggling.

“We are seeing STEM scores at 30-year lows. COVID certainly had lots to do with this. This in addition to the flood of AI inundating students with easily accessible answers over the past two-plus years,” Nhon said.

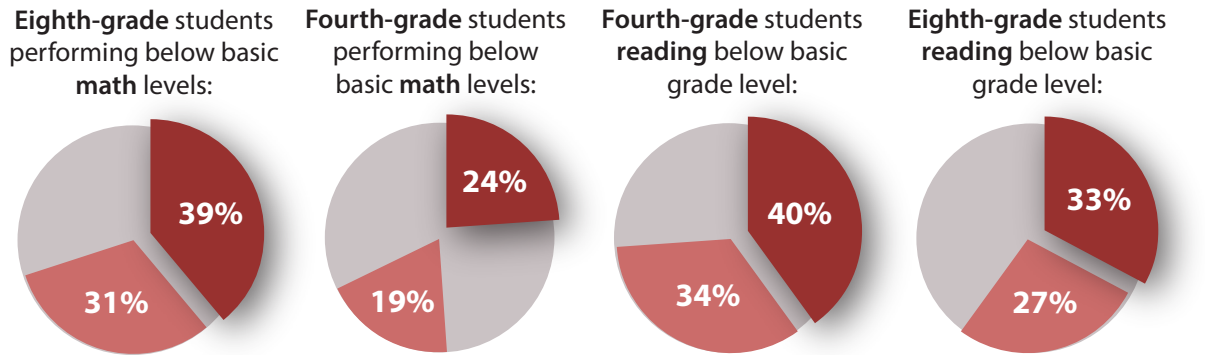
“We are 27 points lower since prior to the pandemic on the average math performance on the international TIMSS exam. This is a tragic reality we must face head-on as a nation,” he said, referring to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

‘A BIG PAIN POINT’

Sari Factor, chief strategy officer for Imagine Learning LLC, an education technology firm that offers online learning curriculums to schools, said students

LONG COVID
PANDEMIC’S STRESSORS, RESETS AND HANGOVERS FELT FIVE YEARS LATER

MATH AND READING PERFORMANCE 2024 2019





AP PHOTO/HAVEN DAILY

A student plays the flute while wearing a protective face mask during a middle school music class in 2021 during the pandemic.



AP PHOTO/MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ, FILE

The COVID-19 pandemic saw school shutdowns and students learning at home, as well as mask and social distancing requirements.

fell behind, on average, more than four months with all the disruptions and stresses of COVID.

“It’s a big pain point for all of us,” she said. She said school districts and teachers weren’t really equipped to transfer over to online instruction during the pandemic, and now need to look at ways to catch up, such as high-dosage tutoring and more individualized instruction approaches.

“Nobody was set up to Zoom school,” Factor said of districts, classroom teachers and populations of students who might not have had adequate internet or technology access at home.

Test Scores

Number of states and territories that saw test scores go up between 2019 and 2024:

0 Eighth-grade reading

0 Eighth-grade math

1 Fourth grade reading*

2 Fourth-grade math**

* Louisiana saw better fourth-grade reading scores.

**Alabama and Puerto Rico saw improvements with fourth-grade math.

Factor said younger kids aren’t as equipped to learn online as their older counterparts.

“For kids in (kindergarten through fifth grade), imagine teaching reading over Zoom,” Factor said. “It doesn’t work very well. They also missed the socialization. Learning is a human endeavor.”

There are continued scholastic gaps based on wealth and poverty, as well as with “English learners’ versus native speakers. But the post-COVID challenges persist for all students.

“Both math and reading have really fallen,” said MacKenzie Price, founder of 2HR Learning and Alpha Schools, which offers a more condensed learning model and smaller classrooms at

schools in Florida, Texas and California.

Price said that kids who fall behind early and continue to struggle going forward lose confidence and engagement.

“Competence breeds confidence,” she said, noting the challenges pre- and post-pandemic faced by kids with learning challenges or coming from underserved or marginalized communities.

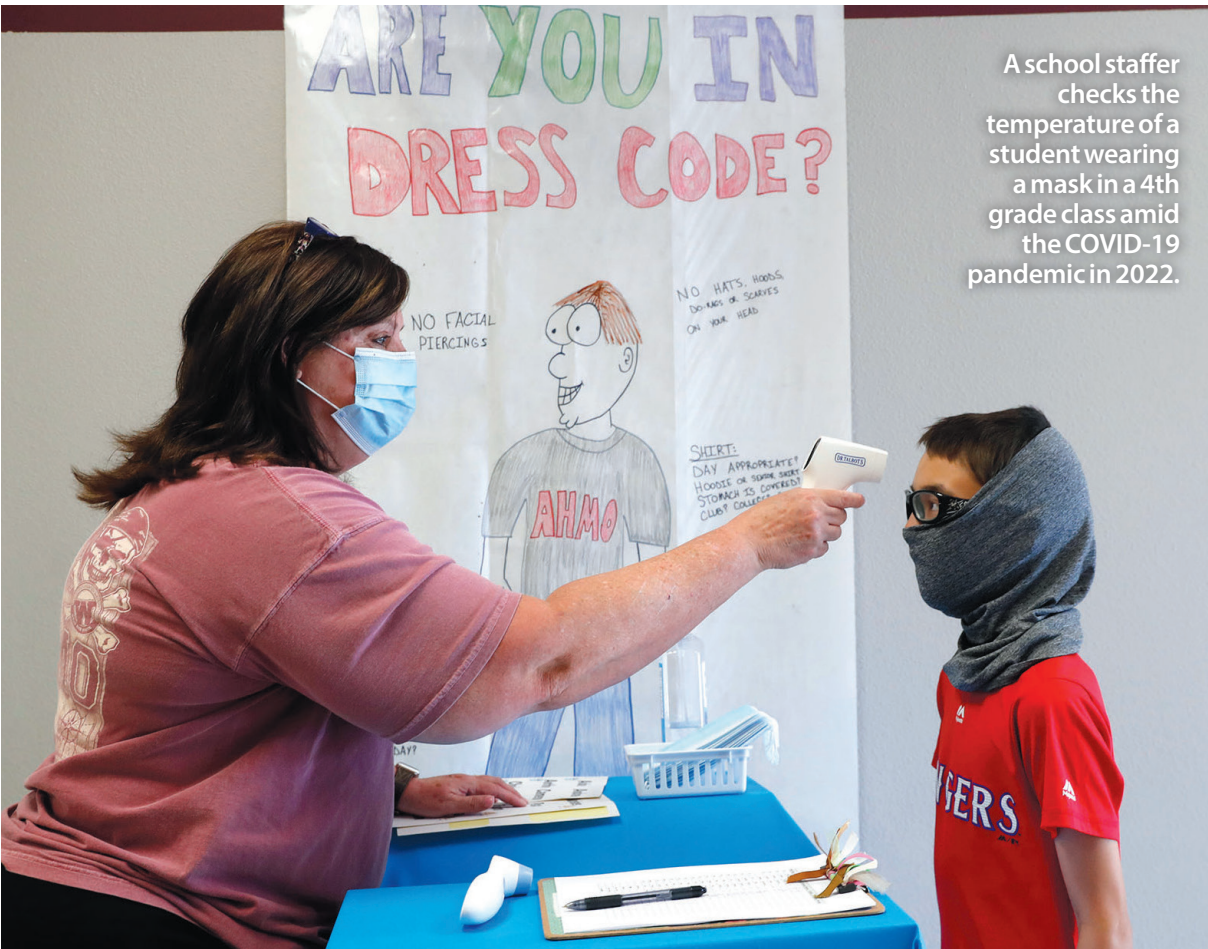
“Traditional schooling does a terrible job of motivating students,” Price said.

‘URGENT WAKE-UP CALL’

State school superintendents across the country recognized the test scores as a continued call for action.

“The drop in eighth-grade reading scores is part of a broader national trend,” said Utah State Superintendent of Public Instruction Sydnee Dickson, who is stepping down from her appointed post in June, referring to her state’s 4 percentage point drop in reading proficiency since 2022 and 6 points since 2019. “More children are falling below the proficient level, underscoring the critical need to double down on effective reading interventions and support for our students.”

In Wyoming, State Superintendent of Public



AP PHOTO/MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ, FILE

Instruction Megan Degenfelder, a Republican, noted her state outperformed the national average, stressing a continued focus on third-grade reading proficiency. In a statement, her office noted the post-pandemic need to find best practices for “early literacy instruction” and “growing mental health and behavior issues with students.”

In Wisconsin, Democratic State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jill Underly called the new NAEP test scores an “urgent wake-up call” and called for increased state education funding.

All this comes as President Donald Trump eyes a potential dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education as part of an austerity push, arguing education should be more at the state and local level, school districts navigate funding streams after federal infusions during COVID, and the teaching profession sees contemporary challenges with burnout and attrition.

‘SUBSTANTIAL HIT’

Other educators have seen a decline in reading among students and across society propelled by social media and technology.

“Reading has taken a substantial hit; kids are, with certain exceptions, just not doing much of it anymore,” said Dan Ulin, CEO of Elite Student Coach, which helps students with their college paths.

Amy Kirkcaldy, principal admissions counselor at IvyWise, which also helps students with their college plans and academic paths, agrees.

“They just don’t read books anymore,” she said,

pointing to the K-12 preference for electronic books.

Katrina Gomez, a Florida-based instructor with tutoring service Kumon North America and a former elementary school teacher, said some students have struggled with learning consistency since the pandemic, and post-COVID inflation and economic stresses have challenged families’ ability to pay for tutoring programs.

“Which can make it difficult for them to commit fully to extracurricular learning,” Gomez said.

‘CRACKING THE CODE’

Jess Reid Sliwerski, CEO of Ignite Reading (which offers one-on-one online tutoring), challenges traditional approaches to reading and reading comprehension. She said as many as 60% of young students need “super explicit instruction, plus lots of repetition.”

“The brain literally has to be hardwired and almost remapped in order for reading to become an automatic process,” she said. “They need systematic, direct, explicit instruction in what are called foundational reading skills.”

“The English language is code, and you have to learn how to crack that code,” Sliwerski said.

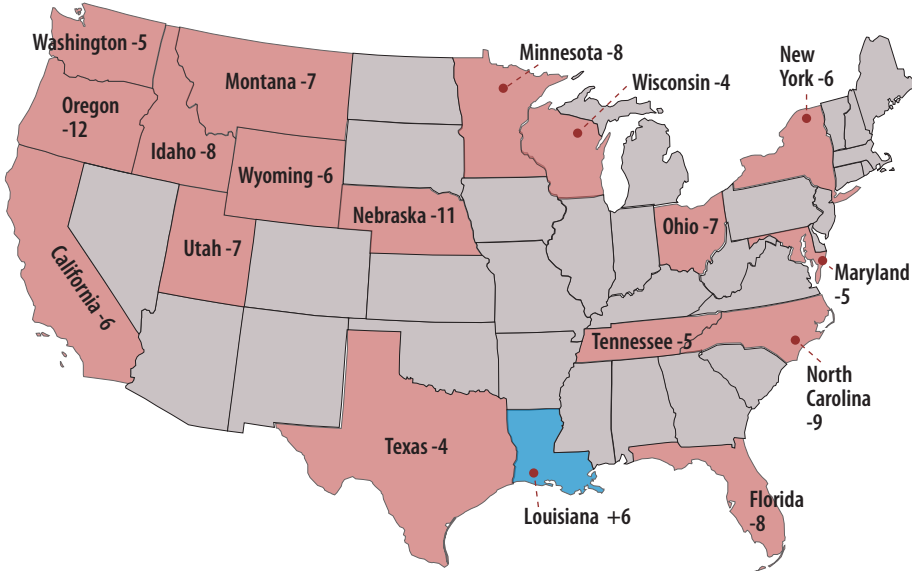
Unfortunately, it’s hard for school systems to change their modus operandi.

“School systems operate like factory models,” said Sliwerski, who sees the need for paradigm shifts and new approaches.

She’s not alone.

NEXT STORY UP — SOLUTIONS.

Percentage point drops or increases of fourth-grade students reading at grade level (2024 vs. 2019)



Percentage point drops or increases of eighth-grade students at or above basic math levels (2024 vs. 2019)

